DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 902 CS 501 927

AUTHOR Wiemann, John M.
TITLE A Description of Competent and Incompetent Communication Behavior.
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (63rd, Washington, D.C., December 1-4, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; College Students; *Communication Problems; *Communication Skills; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Comparative Analysis; *Interaction Process Analysis; *Language Research; Nonverbal Communication; Research Needs; Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

Five components of communication competence have been derived from research: affiliation/support, empathy, behavioral flexibility, social relaxation, and interaction management. This paper describes these dimensions of communication competence; it then reports on a study in which two college females judged by their peers to be effective communicators, and two judged to be ineffective, participated in conversations that were videotaped and analyzed with regard to the five components of communication competence. Analysis of the findings indicated that the persons judged more competent signaled more affiliation/support and empathy, demonstrated more social relaxation, and managed their interactions more smoothly through the use of more management cues. No significant differences in behavioral flexibility were noted. The report notes implications drawn from the data and points out directions for future research. (GW)

**********
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
**********

ED147902

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

# A DESCRIPTION OF COMPETENT AND INCOMPETENT COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR

John M. Wiemann
Department of Speech
University of California, Santa Barbara

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John M. Wiemann

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

CS501 927

Presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Washington, D.C., December 1977. Thanks are extended to Jane Ghuzzi, Marilyn Malone and Carole Stecher for their assistance at various stages of this research and to Mary Wiemann for her assistance throughout. This project was supported, in part, by Rutgers Research Council Grant #07-2148.

The purpose of this research is to describe and examine some aspects of face-to-face conversation. Specifically, the conversation behavior of individuals judged communicatively "competent" or "incompetent" is considered, with the goal of discovering specific behavioral differences that might exist between such people.

Presumed here is that individuals' interpersonal performances, including social conversation, can be arranged along a continuum bounded on one pole by completely incompetent behavior (e.g., situationally inappropriate, rude, insensitive, boorish, selfish, etc.) and on the other pole by completely competent behavior (situationally appropriate, mutually satisfying, sensitive, well-timed, etc.). People commonly judge their fellow interactants to be competent or incompetent; that individuals are concerned about and find important these judgments made about them is evidenced by the scores of etiquette, advice and self-help books now in print which are concerned with improving one's interpersonal behavior and, consequently, one's relationships.

Even though behavioral scientists' interest in "ordinary" conversation is relatively recent, there seems to be agreement (1) that various communicative behaviors are more or less appropriate in specific situations (cf. Goffman, 1959, 1963; Lakoff, 1972); (2) that people are aware of and can control their behavior (cf. Argyle, 1969; Bochner and Kelly, 1974); (3) that the ability to be aware and in control of one's behavior is differentially distributed throughout the population (cf. Snyder, 1974); and (4) that observers discriminate among competent and incompetent communication behaviors on the part of others (cf. Wiemann, 1977).

One assumption implicit in this thinking is that communicative competence is manifested in the behaviors of interactants. In order to empirically test this assumption, a research project was designed to identify individuals judged competent or incompetent by their peers and then to describe the behaviors of the individuals so judged. Before elaborating on the procedure used in this research, I will first briefly review the competence paradigm and discuss the research strategy adopted.

## The Competence Paradigm

The communicative competence paradigm has its roots in the work of Argyle (1969), Argyris (1962, 1965), Bochner and Kelly (1974), Goffman, (1959, 1963, 1967) and others. In the sense that it is discussed here, communicative competence is defined as the "ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he may successfully accomplish his own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation" (Wiemann, 1977, p. 198). I have previously explicated and partially tested a model of communicative competence composed of five dimensions: interaction management, empathy, social relaxation, affiliation/support and behavioral flexibility (Wiemann, 1977). Based on this model, the competent communicator can be described as "being other-oriented, while at the same time maintaining the ability to accomplish his or her own interpersonal goals. This other-orientation is demonstrated by the communicator being empathic, affiliative and supportive, and relaxed (as opposed to anxious) while interacting with others. Moreover, the competent communicator is capable of adapting his behavior as the situation within an encounter changes and/or as he moves from encounter to encounter. The way the communicator manages an interaction contributes, in part at least, to his fellow interactants' perceptions of his competence" (Wiemann, 1977, p. 211).

Such a conception of communicative behavior lends itself to a descriptive research methodology. The five dimensions of competence can be described in terms of discrete behavioral signals. These signals, which will be detailed below, are "acts" (Duncan & Fiske, 1977) as opposed to "action." They are the specific, immediate behaviors of which face-to-face interaction is composed. Data generated are relatively objective in that they are obtained from the observation of categories of behavior which require a "sharply narrowed focus of attention, minimal levels of inference, discrete decisions, and moment-to-moment judgments, while avoiding the attribution of meaning, intent, and the like to the observed participants" (Duncan & Fiske, 1977, p. 24).

Two concepts developed by Duncan and Fiske (1977) help clarify the relationship of this descriptive research strategy to a theoretic foundation: convention and interaction strategy. Both concepts are easily adapted to the competence paradigm. Conventions are rule-governed behavioral routines[1] employed by an interactant to facilitate "cooperation between persons in situations in which that cooperation is required to achieve a result that is in some sense mutually beneficial to those participating in the situation" (Duncan & Fiske, 1977, p. 249). Conventions are used when there are (or may be) "coordination problems" between interactants, including the coordination of expectations of what is "supposed to happen" in a given situation and the determination of preferable "solutions." Effective and appropriate use of conventions in social interaction is an important part of communicative competence.

The choice of which conventions to enact over a period of time and the patterns of action resulting from these choices is a person's interaction strategy. Duncan and Fiske maintain that "the performance of a convention inevitably involves a concomitant interaction strategy" (1977, p. 288). Decisions regarding an individual's communicative competence are based on his or her typical strategies in social interaction.

The methodology employed here, then, is to describe the interaction strategy of previously identified competent and incompetent communicators in terms of the five dimensions of the communicative competence model mentioned above.[2] These dimensions are describable in terms of signals and conventions. An aggregate score for each competence dimension, based on the signals[3] enacted, can be computed for each interactant. Using these scores, the interaction strategy for each individual can be roughly sketched.

The question which guided the research can thus be stated: Do competent communicators differ from incompetent communicators in terms of specific behaviors they use to signal affiliation/support, empathy, social relaxation, behavioral flexibility and management of the interaction?

Description of the Components of Communicative Competence

A crucial step in answering the research question is to identify the signals that compose the dimensions of competence and then to describe these signals in terms of discrete acts. Such acts should be readily observable, and require a low level of inference by observers. These requirements and previous research on face-to-face interaction led to the initial inclusion of 27 behaviors in this study. A more complete review of the research dealing with these various behaviors can be found in Wiemann (1977). The behaviors considered in this research are described below, grouped under the competence dimension they signal; some behaviors operate to signal more than one dimension and are so listed.

Affiliation/Support

1. Other-directed Gaze: the amount of time spent looking at the facial area around the eyes of the other person.

2. Active Listening: cues which signal the person is listening (attending) to the other interactant, including:
   a. Smiles: positive facial expressions marked by upturned corners of the mouth (as opposed to a straight or downturned mouth).
   b. Headnods: cyclical up-and-down movements of the head (each cycle coded as a separate act).
   c. Reinforcers: words that provide feedback to the speaker, but do not necessarily attempt to gain the speaking role for the interactant uttering them, including short questions seeking clarification (e.g., "yeah," "yes," "um-hum").

3. Speaking Time: time spent as "speaker" (i.e., holding the floor).

4. Proximity: distance between interactants.

5. Relationship Markers: verbal indications of formal vs. informal or familiar relationships (e.g., "Yes, Your Honor" vs. "Yes, Honey").

6. Owning Statements: statements which indicate that the speaker accepts responsibility for the affect expressed (e.g., "I like to see people have fun" vs. "Everyone likes to see people have fun").

7. Disparaging Statements: statements which categorize a person, object or behavior in a negative way (e.g., "A person who is sloppy is inconsiderate").

8. Touching: physical contact with the other interactant.

9. Temporal Non-immediacy: use of verbs and adverbs that displace a person or object in time (either past or future to the extent that they seem to be of no immediate concern (e.g., "We will have to work this problem out"); verbalizations which displace the relationship under discussion (e.g., "We were roommates").

10. Spacial Non-immediacy: use of demonstrative adjectives which displace a person or object in space (e.g., "those" vs. "these"; "I don't like that book"); personal pronouns which separate rather than include a person or object (e.g., "Joan and I" vs. "We").

Increases in other-directed gaze, active listening, informal relationship markers, owning statements, proximity and touching signal increased affiliation.[4] Increases in speaking time signal increased affiliation, but this relationship is tempered by the requirements of conversation (e.g., both interactants must have the opportunity to speak and to get said what they want to say). Disparaging statements, temporal and spatial non-immediacy and formal relationship markers signal disaffiliation.

Empathy

1. Active Listening.
2. Temporal Non-immediacy.
3. Spatial Non-immediacy.
4. Disparaging Statements.
5. Overt Expression: verbal expression of empathy (e.g., "I know how you feel").

Behavioral Flexibility

1. Temporal Non-immediacy.
2. Spatial Non-immediacy.
3. Relationship markers.
4. Overall changes in all behaviors from situation to situation.

Social Relaxation

1. Posture (reclining angle): when the plane defined by a line from the communicator's shoulders to hips is away from the vertical plane, such that the interactant is leaning backward to some degree.

2. Posture (forward-leaning angle): when the plane defined by a line from the interactant's shoulders to hips is away from the vertical plane, such that the interactant is bending forward at the waist.

3. Object Manipulations: touching, fondling or holding some object including clothing, cigarettes, pens, etc., but excluding self-manipulations.

4. Self-manipulations: touching, fondling or holding any part of the interactant's own body.

5. Buffers: short words or phrases which are content-free, more or less stereotypical, and which either precede or follow substantive statements (e.g., "but-ah," "you know," "or something").

6. Speaking Time.

Reclining angle, self-manipulations and speaking time indicate relaxation. Buffers are somewhat ambiguous but seem to be related to relaxation. The other behaviors signal anxiety.

Interaction Management

1. Turn-yielding: the convention by which the "speaker" signals the "auditor" that he is ready to relinquish the speaking turn. This convention is signaled by the enactment of one or more of the following behaviors:

   a. Other-directed gaze: increased gazing at the other culminating in a "steady" gaze.
   b. Gesticulations: hand and arm movements (excluding self- and object-manipulations); the presence of a gesticulation serves to counter-mand other yielding signals (Duncan & Fiske, 1977).
   c. Sentence completions: completions of a declarative statement with no attempt to continue.
   d. Interrogatives: questions specifically directed to the other member of the conversation.
   e. Incompletions: failure by the speaker to grammatically complete a sentence, sometimes indicated by a trailing off of voice.
   f. Posture (reclining angle).

All of these signals, except gesticulations, are positively related to turn-yielding.

2. Turn-requesting: the convention by which the "auditor" signals the "speaker" that he would like to assume the speaking turn. This convention is signaled by the enactment of one or more of the following behaviors:

   a. Other-directed gaze: increased gazing at the other culminating in a "steady" gaze.
   b. Headnods.
   c. Buffers.
   d. Posture (forward-leaning angle).
   e. Self-manipulations.

All of these behaviors are positively related to turn-requesting.

3. Interruptions: attempts to assume the speaking role before it has been relinquished by the current speaker. This is the result of a breakdown in the turn-taking mechanism (Duncan, 1972; Wiemann & Knapp, 1975).

4. Pauses: silences of longer than three seconds.

5. Topic control: unilateral (as opposed to mutual) topic changes, as indicated by abrupt topic changes.

As it turned out, not all of these acts were useful in this research. Some were exhibited too infrequently and others seemed to be unrelated to the phenomena under study. These points will be taken up during the discussion of the data analysis. Only three conventions have been included in this category system: active listening and turn-requesting are hypothesized as conventions, but the data available are too sketchy for a definitive statement just yet; turn-yielding, on the other hand, has been demonstrated to work as a conversational convention by Duncan and Fiske (1977). These conventions will be treated here in terms of their constituent signals for the sake of parsimony. All of the other behaviors listed are signals for possible conventions, but the exact structure of these conventions still awaits empirical investigation. Coding procedures as well as other methodological matters are discussed in the next section.

## Procedures

The general strategy of this study was to find a group of individuals, well-acquainted with each other, willing to respond to questionnaires about themselves and their acquaintances, and subsequently willing to be video-taped conversing. Such a strategy allows for the identification of relatively competent and incompetent communicators, as those people are judged by their peers.

### Subjects

A total N of 22 females living together in a dormitory house at an eastern university agreed to participate in the study. This was the complete resident population of the house. Ss were told the study was concerned with the structure of conversation. This

group was approached because they had been living together for eight months in a relatively small living unit. Subjects approximate a random sample of dorm students at the college in that room assignments are made by lottery. Only six Ss came to the house as roommate pairs; all four undergraduate classes were represented.

Identification of Competent and Incompetent Communicators

Ss were asked to complete a "Situational Effectiveness Questionnaire." It detailed nine communication situations and asked each S to name the person she thought would be the most effective and the least effective in each situation. The questionnaire was designed to tap a range of social and task situations that would be common to the house. The instrument included questions such as: "You have just had a terrible fight with your boyfriend and you are emotionally 'strung out.' With which of your housemates would you most like to talk? With which of your housemates would you least like to talk?" House residents were consistently in agreement as to the two most effective and two least effective communicators across situations.

Video Tape Generation

The four Ss chosen as most and least effective were told that they were randomly selected to participate in the video taping portion of the study, which was conducted three weeks after the questionnaires were completed. Each of these women participated in two conversations, one with a peer-designated competent partner and the other with a peer-designated incompetent partner. They were told that they should role-play roommates who had planned to spend the evening together. Ss were told they could talk about anything they wanted, but one was told that after some preliminary conversation she should confront the other with the fact that she (the other) had become inconsiderate. She was to try to get the other to agree to be more considerate without damaging the relationship. (This is subsequently referred to as the "reprimand role.") All four conversations were allowed to

run their course, and ranged in time from 4 minutes 22 seconds to 10 minutes 15 seconds. Descriptions of the conversations are presented in Table 1.

Debriefing

After the taping session Ss were asked if they would like to see the tapes of themselves. Both during and after the viewing of the tapes they all agreed that the taped behavior was characteristic of each person, with the exception of posture and postural shifts; most of these comments were spontaneous. Informal questioning of these and other house members indicated that the real criterion for selecting participants for the video taping was unknown and unsuspected. Participants were not told the actual criterion for selection, since such revelation seemed to serve no worthwhile purpose.

Coding

Two coding procedures were adopted--content analysis for language data and "behavior analysis" for non-language data.

Content analysis. The four conversations were transcribed from the video tapes. Two transcribers worked independently to produce a first draft of the transcript. One of these transcribers and the researcher then reconciled the two drafts with the help of the video tape. Finally the researcher and the other transcriber compared the revised transcript with the video tape again. All totaled, some 60 hours were spent preparing the transcript.

Two people trained in content analysis procedures performed the actual analysis using both the transcript and the video tape. They worked independently on one conversation--from which reliability estimates were obtained--and together on the other three. Coding discrepencies for the conversation coded independently were later worked out between the coders. Inter-coder reliability was estimated using Holsti's (1969) Coefficient of Reliability. Inter-coder reliability was very high, ranging from 1.00 to .87.[5]

Behavior analysis. The remaining behaviors were coded from the video tape. Eight people were trained to reçognize the non-verbal behaviors of interest and to indicate their display by one of the Ss by activating a switch. Such codings were recorded on a Rustrak 242-8 Event Recorder. Data were represented by tracings on graph paper which indicated their frequency, placement in the stream of behavior, and duration. Each coder was responsible for only one of the behaviors of a subject at a time; consequently, several viewings of the video tape were necessary to complete the coding and this was done over the period of one week in sessions of two to four hours. Inter-coder reliability was estimated using Pearson's r statistic. Inter-coder reliabilities were very high, ranging from 1.00 to .93, with the exception of .82 estimate for the speaking turns category.[6]

## Results

Descriptions of competent and incompetent conversation behavior were constructed in terms of the five dimensions of competence: affiliation/support, empathy, social relaxation, behavioral flexibility and interaction management. By treating each dimension in terms of the signals which evoke it, numerical "competence indices" were constructed using a linear model. Under this model, each signal is counted as the equivalent of any other signal for that dimension, having the same practical force of any other signal. For example, two turn-requesting signals are more likely to produce a change in the speaker role than one. Since no data are available dealing with differential magnitude of effect of various signals, the temptation to talk about two signals being twice as forceful as one will be avoided. Duncan and Fiske (1977) discuss several models for treating data like those presented here and argue for the linear model.[7] Data reported by Duncan (1972) and Wiemann (1977) support the validity of the linear model--given our present understanding of conversational phenomena.

The data were normalized in order to make conversations of various lengths comparable. Frequencies were converted to

rates-per-minute, and durations to percentages of time spent engaged in the behavior. The competence indices were computed by obtaining the summed means of the rate measures of the various signals for each group of Ss; percentages were not included in the indices. Some behaviors are negative signals (e.g., non-immediacy behaviors signal disaffiliation and a lack of empathy) and are included in the indices as negative numbers. The higher the numerical index, the more competent the person is.

Descriptions of four competence dimensions in terms of both rates and percentages of behavior give a relatively unambiguous picture of the way in which competent and incompetent communicators differ.

Affiliation/support and empathy. Affiliation/support and empathy are treated as one convention for analysis purposes because the behaviors which differentiate these dimensions of competence were not used with sufficient frequency by these Ss to comfortably include them in the analysis, and thus make a distinction between the two dimensions. Clustering these dimensions in this way does little violence to the competence model because of the high interdependence between affiliation/support and empathy (Wiemann, 1977).

Affiliation/support and empathy were signaled by six categories of behavior. The peer-designated competent communicators displayed more affiliation and empathy signals than their counterparts in five of these categories: other-directed gaze, per cent of time speaking, temporal and spatial non-immediacy and owning statements. The incompetent communicators signaled more active listening. The data are displayed in Table 2.[8]

On the whole, competent communicators signaled a greater degree of affiliation and empathy than did the incompetents, as indicated by the competence index (7.04 vs. 1.84). Table 2 illustrated that a S's partner's behavior influenced the rate and duration at which most signals were displayed. For example, Subject B (incompetent) gazed at both of her partners almost constantly. Subject C (competent) almost doubled the mean length

of her gazes when she was interacting with B, as compared to when she interacted with D. When the competent dyad (Cx-Dy) and the incompetent dyad (Ax-By) are compared across several signals, a clear difference in the type of mutual influence characteristic of each dyad emerges. The competent dyad evidences reciprocity of behavior, while the incompetent dyad displays a much more complementary behavior pattern. The two mixed dyads are more symmetrical than the incompetent one, but less so than the competent dyad. Though no data directly relevant to the nature of the relationships among the subjects is available, these behavioral indicators suggest what those relationships might be. It is likely that the absolute frequencies and durations displayed and observed during a conversation are not nearly so important as the reciprocity of display which indicates a symmetrical relationship (Harris, 1977, discusses reciprocity in interaction management in a similar manner).

Social relaxation. Two rate categories--buffers and self-manipulations--and per cent of time in the speaking role, served as signals of social relaxation. Competent Ss displayed more buffers and more self-manipulations than did the incompetents (see Table 3). Moreover, they spoke more nearly 50% of the time than did their counterparts. The competence index, computed from the two rates, indicates that they were more relaxed than the incompetents (13.76 vs. 11.35). The pattern of symmetrical and complementary behavior displays is not evident for the rate categories, but does hold for the speaking time measure.

Interaction management. Five categories of interaction management signals were analyzed--turn-yielding, turn-requesting, rate of interruptions, per cent of interruptions per total turns, and topic control. The competent Ss displayed more turn-yielding and turn-requesting behaviors--thus increasing the likelihood of successful exchanges of the speaking turn; they also exhibited control of the topic of conversation approximately 50% of the time. However, they did interrupt their partners more frequently

than did incompetent Ss (see Table 4). The competence indices indicate that competent Ss did indeed behave more competently than their counterparts (16.50 vs. 14.15).

Behavioral flexibility. Only two behaviors hypothesized to be signals of behavioral flexibility were observed in this research, temporal and spatial non-immediacy--both indicators of inflexibility. Competent Ss used fewer of both types of utterances than did incompetent Ss. Since both of these measures are included under the affiliation/support dimension, little is added to our understanding of communicative competence by discussing them separately.

An overall measure of behavioral flexibility is the adaptations one makes in his or her behavior as the situation in which the person is in changes. It is reasonable to expect that Ss would change their behavior from one conversation to the other in order to adapt to a new partner and a new role. Data presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4 reveal changes were made by all Ss in several behavior categories. In order to estimate the magnitude of these changes, the rates of active listening, temporal and spatial non-immediacy, owning statements, turn-yielding and turn-requesting were cast into a contingency table and compared using the chi-square statistic. No statistically significant (alpha = .05) differences were obtained between the role performances for any of the Ss.

Summary

There seem to be clear differences in the moment-to-moment conversational behaviors between competent and incompetent communicators. People judged more competent by their peers signaled more affiliation/support and empathy, and managed their interactions more smoothly by virtue of using more management cues. Behavioral flexibility is more ambiguous here. While some of the behavioral cues associated with lack of flexibility were exhibited more by incompetent communicators, an attempt to assess changes between roles statistically produced null results. The

lack of statistical significance could be the result of an insensitive behavioral index as much as lack of behavioral adaptation on the part of the Ss.

The overall difference between competent and incompetent communication was assessed by means of the chi-square statistic. A statistically significant difference was not obtained. But this does not mean that the differences observed between the two groups is not "real" or important. In addition to the relative low power of the chi-square and the small n used here, there is no evidence that differences that make a difference in a practical sense will appear as statistically significant. Wiemann (1977) demonstrated that very small changes in interaction management behaviors produced very large (and statistically significant) differences in the way interactants were perceived by others. We are left with the empirical question of how much does the behavior of interactants have to differ before their fellow interactants classify them in one category or another.

## Conclusion

The small behavioral differences between competent and incompetent communicators leaves these findings open to several interpretations. It could be concluded that there are no "real" differences between the conversational behavior of competents and incompetents; but this conclusion would be premature. A more reasonable conclusion, given the data available from this and other research, is that the observed differences are adequate for distinguishing relatively competent and incompetent communicators. From a practical standpoint, we do not know how much of a difference in behavior is significant to conversational participants. Since their peers distinguished these Ss from the rest of the dorm residents as well as from each other, we must assume that these Ss differ in some practical ways--that is, in ways which are important to their peers. People who interact with each other daily over a long period of time may become very sensitive to nuances in each other's behavior, and consequently can make

fine distinctions among those others based on seemingly small differences.

Interpretation of these data is hampered to some extent by the fact that the Ss were acquainted. Unlike initial interactions where we can expect behavior to be guided and patterned by predictable cultural norms, interactions between acquaintances are patterned, to some extent at least, by norms idiosyncratic to the relationship. It is likely that the subject population had developed its own definitions of appropriate (competent) communication behavior. The trends in the differences between these competent and incompetent Ss is in the direction predicted by the model discussed earlier, a model developed primarily from data dealing with interacting "strangers." Based on this observation, we can tentatively conclude that the general cultural norms dealing with conversational behavior are still "in force" after a long period of acquaintanceship.

The observed symmetry in several behavior categories of the competent dyad, and the complementarity of the incompetent imply a structure for competent peer relationships. This symmetrical structure is not unlike that suggested by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) as necessary for "healthy" relationships. The fact that the symmetry is communicated on the relatively "micro" level described here indicates the importance of these small behaviors to our interpersonal relationships.

This study points to several directions for future research in the structure of conversation in general, and communicative competence in particular. First priority should be placed on obtaining fine-grained descriptions of conversations involving people with varying types of relationships (e.g., superior-subordinate, work-group peers, intimates, strangers) who are trying to accomplish various types of tasks (e.g., getting to know each other, solving a problem, passing the time). By fine grained descriptions, I mean transcriptions that present the co-occurrence of verbal and nonverbal behavior on a moment-to-moment basis.

Such descriptions should help us discover how various behaviors work together to accomplish conversation. Subsequent research also needs to explore the relative "force" of various signals which compose a convention, and the relative importance of the conventions themselves. Indeed, there are still many unanswered questions concerning conversational conventions and the dimensions of competence they signal.

The communicative competence paradigm seems worthy of additional investigation, not only as an approach to analyzing the structure of conversations, but--more importantly, I think--as a paradigm from which to develop a pragmatic theory of interpersonal communication. Differences in the conversational performances of relatively competent and incompetent communicators are described in this report. But the nature of the relationship of the dimensions of the competence model remains in question. What is their degree of interdependence? Would they be more profitably recast in a different form, perhaps as only three or four dimensions? The self-monitoring of performances requires more investigation as does the attribution process of conversation participants about the performances of their fellows. Do real life conversationalists make the same kinds of attributions and draw the same kinds of inferences as do communication researchers?

The description of conversation behavior presented here suggests where we might profitably look for answers concerning the structure of conversation and how the differential structuring of conversation by participants can influence their effectiveness as communicators.

Given the nature of descriptive research, any conclusions drawn must be couched in tentative terms, and this is particularly true for this study. Yet the data lead to three implications worth noting and following up with more conclusive research strategies: (1) very small behavioral differences differentiate between competent and incompetent communicators when acquaintances are making the distinctions, (2) culture-wide conversation

norms still pattern conversation behavior of acquaintances, and (3) competent peers structure their conversations symmetrically, while incompetents do not.

## Footnotes

[1]See Cushman and Pearce (1977) for a discussion of the logic underlying the notion of rule-governed behavior and its application to communication theory.

[2]Actually the Ss in this research can only be categorized as relatively competent or incompetent as compared with the group from which they were drawn.

[3]No further distinction will be made here between signals and conventions. The decision not to make the distinction was necessitated by our limited knowledge of specific, culture-wide conventions. The conventions that we do have some data concerning will be identified, but will be treated in terms of the signals which compose them.

[4]The appropriateness of these behaviors (as well as others discussed in this paper), of course, depend on the nature of the interactants' relationship.

[5]Content analysis categories (and reliability estimates) are: completions (.93), interrogative requests (.97), incompletions (.99), interruptions (.87), buffers (.95), reinforcers (.95), temporal non-immediacy (.98), spatial non-immediacy (.93), owning statements (.90), topic control (.96), and topic changes (.93). Three additional behaviors were coded, but were not used in the analysis because their frequency of occurrence was too low for meaningful analysis. They are: stutter starts (.99), relationship markers (1.00) and disparaging statements (.99).

[6]Behaviors coded (and estimated reliabilities) are: gesticulations (.99), pauses (.96), other-directed gazes (duration - .93; frequency - .94), speaking turns (.82), speaking time (.99), head nods (.99), smiles (.99), self-manipulations (.99), object manipulation (.99). Postural shifts (1.00) occurred too infrequently for meaningful analysis.

[7]This adding together of behaviors in a linear fashion probably does much damage to conversational phenomena under study. But it does allow us to create rough indices without accounting for idiosyncratic conversation styles or the moment-to-moment attentiveness of interactants to each other.

[8]Tables 2, 3 and 4 should be read with the dyad composition (specified in Table 1) in mind.

## References


Argyle, M. Social interaction. Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1969.

Argyris, C. Interpersonal competence and organizational effectiveness. Homewood, Ill.: Irwin-Dorsey, 1962.

Argyris, C. Explorations in interpersonal competence--I. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 1965, 1, 58-83.

Bochner, A. P. & Kelly, C. W. Interpersonal competence: Rationale, philosophy, and implementation of a conceptual framework. Speech Teacher, 1974, 23, 279-301.

Cushman, D. & Pearce, W.B. Generality and necessity in three types of human communication theory. Communication Yearbook, 1977, 1, 173-182.

Duncan, S. D. Some signals and rules for taking speaking turns in conversations. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1972, 23, 283-292.

Duncan, S. D. & Fiske, D. W. Face-to-face interaction. Hillsdale, N. J.: Erlbaum, 1977.

Goffman, E. The presentation of self in everyday life. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1959.

Goffman, E. Behavior in public places. New York: Free Press, 1963.

Goffman, E. Interaction ritual. Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor, 1967.

Harris, L. M. The effect of interaction management and background similarity on perceived communication competence and attraction during initial interaction. Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Kentucky, 1977.

Holsti, O. R. Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969.

Lakoff, R. Language in context. Language, 1972, 18, 907-927.

Snyder, M. The self-monitoring of expressive behavior. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1974, 30, 526-537.

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., and Jackson, D. D. Pragmatics of human communication. New York: Norton, 1967.

Wiemann, J. M. Explication and test of a model of communicative competence. Human Communication Research, 1977, 3, 195-213.

Wiemann, J. M. & Knapp, M. L. Turn-taking in conversations. Journal of Communication, 1975, 25, 75-92. .

Table 1. Description of the Conversations

Incompetent Ss: A, B; Competent Ss: C, D

Reprimander role: x; Reprimandee role: y

| Dyad composition | Time to reprimand (in minutes and seconds) | Total time (in minutes and seconds) |
|---|---|---|
| I. Ax - By | 7:17 | 10:15 |
| II. Cx - Dy | 4:13 | 5:59 |
| III. Bx - Cy | 2:08 | 4:22 |
| IV. Dx - Ay | 5:24 | 9:20 |

Table 2. Affiliation/Support and Empathy Signals by Interactant and Role.

| Signal / Interactant role | Ax | Ay | Bx | By | Cx | Cy | Dx | Dy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Eye Behavior (other-directed gaze) a. rate* | 7.09 | 6.13 | 2.95 | 2.23 | 5.00 | 2.95 | 8.39 | 4.67 |
| b. $\bar{x}$ duration (in seconds) | 5.18 | 7.08 | 18.69 | 25.96 | 10.53 | 18.46 | 3.00 | 9.36 |
| c. % of time looking | 61 | 72 | 93 | 97 | 88 | 92 | 42 | 73 |
| 2. Active Listening a. headnods* | .58 | 3.12 | 0.00 | 2.62 | 3.33 | 2.95 | .75 | 2.00 |
| b. smiles* | 3.20 | 2.47 | 7.50 | 5.34 | 2.83 | 5.23 | 1.72 | 3.67 |
| c. reinforcers* | .87 | .43 | 0.00 | .68 | .33 | .23 | .75 | .33 |
| 3. % of Time Speaking | 77 | 52 | 56 | 21 | 51 | 53 | 48 | 49 |
| 4. Temporal Non-immediacy* | 8.54 | 5.48 | 5.00 | 2.16 | 2.33 | 2.95 | 6.02 | 7.50 |
| 5. Spatial Non-immediacy* | 2.43 | 2.47 | 1.59 | .58 | 1.50 | 1.82 | 1.18 | 1.67 |
| 6. Owning Statements* | 1.55 | 2.26 | .68 | .10 | 1.17 | 2.50 | 1.15 | 1.50 |

Competence Index A & B = 1.84 C & D = 7.04

*Included in the Competence Index

Table 3. Social Relaxation Signals by Interactant and Role.

| Interactant role / Signal | Ax | Ay | Bx | By | Cx | Cy | Dx | Dy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Self-manipulations* | 4.56 | 3.11 | 8.64 | .78 | 5.17 | 3.14 | 2.04 | .83 |
| 2. Buffers* | 2.72 | 3.55 | 2.95 | .87 | 6.83 | 1.59 | 2.90 | 5.27 |
| 3. % of Time Speaking | 77 | 52 | 56 | 21 | 51 | 53 | 48 | 49 |

Competence Index A & B = 11.35 C & D = 13.76

*Included in the Competence Index

Table 4. Interaction Management Signals by Interactant and Role.

| Interactant Role / Signal | Ax | Ay | Bx | By | Cx | Cy | Dx | Dy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Turn-Yielding | | | | | | | | |
| a. rate, other-directed gaze while speaking* | 9.88 | 10.61 | 13.60 | 14.31 | 12.58 | 17.83 | 12.00 | 11.00 |
| b. %, other-directed gaze while speaking | 63 | 63 | 95 | 89 | 91 | 93 | 38 | 84 |
| c. x̄ duration, other-directed gaze while speaking (in sec.) | 3.81 | 3.58 | 4.12 | 3.58 | 4.29 | 3.15 | 1.90 | 4.62 |
| d. completions* | 3.34 | 2.69 | 5.23 | 2.91 | 4.00 | 7.73 | 3.67 | 3.33 |
| e. interrogatives* | .97 | .75 | 4.09 | 1.07 | .50 | 2.77 | .32 | 1.33 |
| f. incompletions* | .78 | 1.61 | .45 | .39 | 1.50 | 1.14 | 1.15 | 1.67 |
| 2. Turn-Requesting | | | | | | | | |
| a. rate, other-directed gaze while not speaking* | 12.73 | 7.35 | 10.97 | 5.75 | 12.00 | 13.60 | 9.18 | 11.29 |
| b. %, other-directed gaze while not speaking | 60 | 55 | 75 | 96 | 80 | 78 | 44 | 74 |
| c. x̄ duration, other-directed gaze while not speaking(sec.) | 2.75 | 5.65 | 3.04 | 9.98 | 4.00 | 3.41 | 2.86 | 3.93 |
| d. headnods* | .58 | 3.12 | 0.00 | 2.62 | 3.33 | 2.95 | .75 | 2.00 |
| e. buffers* | 2.72 | 3.55 | 2.95 | .87 | 6.83 | 1.59 | 2.90 | 5.17 |
| f. self-manipulation* | 4.56 | 3.11 | 8.64 | .78 | 5.17 | 3.41 | 2.04 | .83 |
| 3. Interruptions | | | | | | | | |
| a. rate/min.* | .58 | 1.08 | 1.36 | .58 | 1.83 | 0.00 | 1.51 | 2.00 |
| b. rate/turns | .10 | .18 | .09 | .10 | .22 | 0.00 | .29 | .24 |
| 4. % Topic Control | 88 | 60 | 50 | 12 | 50 | 50 | 40 | 50 |

Competence Index A & B = 14.15 C & D = 16.50

*Included in the Competence Index